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Mountain High

by MarvelousMenagerie (HiddenOne)

Summary

It's a lonely stretch of mountain road when Steve and Bucky run into motorcycle trouble. The good news is that a quality mechanic isn't too far away. The bad news is that they like the mechanic too much to leave - and they have worse trouble than a flat tire stalking them.

Notes

For the Marvel Reverse Big Bang!
This was inspired by artwork from Huntress79, links to come XD
Thanks so much to Rise for the beta!

Chapter 1

Steve cursed, letting the wind carry away his frustration as he pulled over to the side of the road.

Not that there was much of it. He had about a foot of pavement before the ground dropped off into a rocky ditch with trees climbing up the other side. These curvy mountain roads didn't offer much buffer for vehicle trouble, already too much trouble to carve out enough road on which to drive, but at least he wasn't half a step away from slipping off into a ravine. No doubt one of those was around the next bend.

In that sense, he supposed he was lucky. That tell-tale pop could've come at a worse time. Swinging his leg off his motorcycle, he propped the bike on its kickstand and went to survey the damage. He knew what he would find, but it was impossible not to look.

And there the back wheel sat, lower than it should, tire flat and useless.

Dragging off his helmet, he ran a hand through his hair and fluffed it from its flattened state. He'd gotten new tires not even three weeks ago, but that was several states and too many miles ago to bother calling up the mechanic for any type of warranty or replacement.

Bucky had pulled over to stop just behind him and turned off his engine. Laughing, he hung over the front of his bike as he eyed Steve's flat.

"Nothin' to do but hop on mine," Bucky said. "Another point to me being the better rider, I think. What got you?"

Rolling his eyes, Steve crouched down, but couldn't tell what had blown it. If it was a shoddy tire, he'd have an argument to take that point away from Bucky's scoreboard. But the real problem was that better rider or not, Steve wasn't driving anywhere.

"If you hadn't tossed that patch kit -"

"Yeah, yeah," Bucky said. "Next time I'll reach for something else."

Steve sighed. Traffic had been light so far, which didn't offer much hope of help, but the bends in the road meant that cars came out of nowhere. It was too much of a risk for Steve to carry the bike and walk, since most humans weren't capable of carrying a motorcycle. The usual human solution wouldn't work here either since there was no cell phone service. But he didn't want to abandon the bike *or* have to ride backseat to Bucky. Bucky would never let him forget.

"You go on ahead. I'll wait here."

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Because I'm going to abandon you in the wilderness with nothing but your broken bike. How about we skip the part where you make me argue with you for an hour about being reasonable and you hop on. There could be a garage just up the road, and we're back in half that."

Steve scowled. He didn't like leaving his bike on the side of the road which was *more* reasonable.

"Don't start. Come on, you know Wilson would agree with me."

"Since when did you start listening to Sam?"

“Since every horror movie ever made has backed up his point that *you don’t split up*.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I can handle myself. There isn’t a mountain lion or chainsaw-toting Jason in sight. ”

“Leatherface is the one with the chainsaw.”

“Whatever.” Steve grimaced, glad he never bothered staying up for those scary movie nights that Sam and Bucky did. “Since this is real life and not a horror movie, I’ll be fine with just me and my bike. You go get help. That last town we went though wasn’t too far back.”

Bucky scowled. “It’s been at least fifty miles. I’m not leaving you.”

“And I’m not leaving my bike.”

“Stop being a punk.”

“Stop being a jerk.” Steve crossed his arms and stood his ground, and Bucky sighed.

“You get on my bike you can feel me up as we go,” Bucky tempted.

Steve’s shoulders loosened, imagining teasing Bucky by running hands up inside his shirt as he tried to drive. He thought he was the better rider? Steve could put that to the test.

And probably crash them in the process and wreck Bucky’s bike as well -

The sound of an engine warned of a vehicle a moment before a dark grey pickup truck came around the curve. Tensing, Steve prepared for a fight until he realized there was only one man in the cab and it wasn’t riding low enough for anyone to be hiding in the bed.

Relief broke over him, and Steve waved an arm in signal. He grinned at Bucky as the truck slowed down, gave them a wide berth as it passed them, and then pulled over.

The driver, a black man who had at least ten years on Steve, stuck his head out the window. “You guys need some help?”

“Got a flat.” Steve thumbed back to his bike as he walked toward the truck. “Any chance you could help us find a tow or a shop?”

The man’s gaze was cool and level, and Steve straightened his shoulders at the evaluation.

“You guys new around here?”

“Just passing through,” Bucky answered, light and relaxed as he came up behind him.

Steve knew it was the better way to play it, to stay loose and relaxed and nonthreatening, but that gaze was piercing. The courtroom was a better place for that look.

“What brings you this way?”

Steve frowned, suspicious, but Bucky clapped a hand to his shoulder and squeezed.

“Relax,” he whispered, then louder he explained, “We were just in Boulder for a courtroom case. You heard of BACA? Bikers Against Child Abuse?” Bucky twisted Steve around by the shoulders and displayed the stitching on the back of his jacket. “That’s what we do. Planned some sightseeing this way on a scenic route to Albuquerque.”

Steve let loose a breath. That wasn't their destination, but it was plausible enough. When he turned around, he was relieved to see the acceptance on the man's face.

The driver stepped out of the truck with a welcoming smile, that cool evaluation gone.

"Interrogation over. We get some shady types around these parts so I won't apologize for being wary, but I'm sorry that help sometimes comes with questions. You said you got a flat? You got a patch kit, I could probably make that work."

"He used it already," Bucky said, elbowing Steve with a grin. "Haven't replaced it yet."

Except it had been Bucky who used it, and not for its usual purpose. They'd needed a projectile to buy themselves some time and that had been the closest thing at hand. Steve had yelled at him afterwards to grab something less useful, and Steve wanted to yell at him again for not admitting to 'using' it.

"Good news is I can still be helpful. Got plenty of space in the back," the man patted the sides of his truck, "and I know the best mechanic in the area. He's a little eccentric, but he does good work and won't overcharge."

"That sounds amazing." Relief uncurled in Steve's chest.

"Happy to help. Let me just slide this fencing over so we don't scratch up your bike. She's a beauty." The man hopped into the bed of the truck and started moving things around.

"Thanks. She's a Street 750. Had her for awhile, but I try to keep her in good shape," Steve said as he wheeled his bike over.

Bucky helped shift the fencing over and then the three of them lifted the bike up into the bed of the truck. Steve gave a performative grunt as he gauged his strength, and then glared as Bucky hid a snicker.

When the bike was settled, Steve held out his hand. "Sorry, think we skipped introductions. I'm Steve Rogers, and I appreciate the help."

"James Rhodes. Good to meet you, even if I didn't give you the friendliest welcome."

"James Barnes, but everyone calls me Bucky."

Rhodes laughed. "I hope you had a best friend who started that. Mine calls me Rhodey, but he gets possessive about that nickname."

"Yeah, this jerk right here." Bucky thumbed at Steve. "But with so many James running around, I needed something and it stuck."

"His middle name is Buchanan," Steve defended.

"Ouch," Rhodes said with a wince. "Well, let's get you guys on your way again. You riding with me, Steve?"

"Yes, if you don't mind." Better to not be tempted to mess with Bucky when there was someone who might be watching. And also Steve could ask about those shady types and see if they're the same shady types that he was used to running into.

"No problem," Rhodes said. "The town is just up ahead. It's a bit off the beaten path - lots of folks

miss the turn, but if you follow me you'll see it," he told Bucky.

"I'll keep close," Bucky promised and headed back to his bike.

"Thanks again," Steve said when he was seated in the truck and Rhodes was watching Bucky's progress in the rear view mirror. It had been hours since they'd seen another vehicle on the road, and if Rhodes hadn't come by they'd still be arguing.

Bucky's engine kicked to life and Rhodes pulled out. "It's a tough place to get stranded. Not much traffic and not much cell service."

"You said something about weird types?" Though there were more weird types than the kind Steve and Bucky were running from.

Rhodes shrugged. "Eh, people worried about gangs and the like, you know? Crazy things like that."

"Yeah, crazy." Steve wished Bucky were here with a better way to ask for more.

"But it's just you two?"

"Yeah, just us." Steve tried not to sound wary. "No gang or anything unless you count the BACA."

"I don't." Rhodes' tone was light.

The truck slowed and then they were turning, and Steve didn't see a road until he did. He blinked, used to trusting his senses but - no wonder the turn was easy to miss.

He peered in the side view mirror and saw Bucky making the turn.

"You mind if I roll down the window? I'm used to the fresh air."

"Go right ahead, unless that's you saying my truck smells."

Steve laughed and rolled down the window. "Not at all, not at all."

He took a deep breath as the wind hit his face again. He loved the scent of the trees and the sound of Bucky's engine behind him. Better that he didn't have to even glance at the mirror to make sure that Bucky was alright.

He wasn't used to sitting in a vehicle he wasn't driving and making small talk with a stranger. The ten second interactions with servers at restaurants or clerks at hotels was easy in comparison to the expected conversation in the truck. Steve didn't know if his deflection skills were up to the task.

"So where are you guys from?"

Steve steeled himself and started talking.

Chapter 2

“Here we are,” Rhodes said as he pointed up ahead.

The town he’d driven into was bigger than Steve expected. There were a few blocks of businesses and two gas stations before they’d turned the corner and there was the mechanic’s garage.

There was no sign, which Steve found odd, but two open bay doors made it obvious what was inside. One port had a sedan inside, the other empty, and rock music filtered out onto the street.

“Hey Tones!” Rhodes shouted out the window as he pulled up behind the sedan. “I’ve got a delivery for you!”

There was no response that Steve could hear, and Rhodes rolled his eyes.

“Come on,” he said to Steve as he parked his truck. “Damn fool can’t hear a thing over his AC/DC.”

Steve hopped out and noticed they were getting attention from the coffee shop across the street. He ducked his head and pretended he hadn’t seen anyone peering out the window. The town wasn’t the smallest Steve had been through, but he and Bucky would still be easily visible as outsiders. It was easier to hide in cities where people were too busy and no one gave a second glance, but he was catching plenty of those now.

Bucky roared up the road, and Steve breathed easier as the attention shifted. He pulled up next to Rhodes, and the music cut off just before Bucky turned off the engine.

“Do my ears deceive me? Is that a Street 750?”

The man who appeared out of the bay was short and grungy, with oil streaked up his bare arms. He was attempting to wipe his hands clean with a rag too filthy for the job, but his smile was all white teeth.

“Honeybear, you shouldn’t have. It’s not even my birthday!”

Steve bit back his smile. The man’s gaze was as equally heavy on Bucky as it was on the bike.

“Okay, next time I won’t,” Rhodes said with a smile. “Not that you appreciate me properly, ignoring me for your music. I even brought you one of those to fix, but no love for your best friend. I see how it is.”

“Platypus, you know it’s not like that. Come on, let’s hug it out.” The man splayed his arms open wide and stepped toward Rhodes.

“Oh no, stay back,” Rhodes warned as he backpedaled. “You aren’t getting that gunk near me when I’ve got meetings yet today.”

“Honeybear,” the man whined and gave chase.

“No, these are important -” Rhodes sighed and gave up when he was tagged, and then subsequently wrapped up in a tight hug.

“You bring me the best presents.”

“That’s why I’m mayor.”

“That and Carol doesn’t want the job.” The man gave Steve a wink like he was in on the joke.

Steve blinked.

“Or Peggy,” Rhodes admitted. “Can’t blame them. Budget meetings this afternoon, and now that I have to hurry home and change. Let’s get this bike unloaded so you can fix her up.”

The mechanic’s gaze sharpened and he trotted around to the back of the truck. He whistled as he took in the bike, one that started off in appreciation but ended up somewhere closer to sympathy.

“You’ve been riding her hard.” A quick flash of a dirty smile, and then it was back to logistics. “I can order the new tire, no problem, but she needs a full check-up.”

Steve bristled in defense, but Bucky’s laughter stopped him from snarling.

“Good idea, Steve rides her real hard. Mind giving mine a look over as well? I can be a little rough sometimes too.” Bucky’s smile was all flirt.

Steve gave himself an internal shake. Again, Bucky’s way to play it was a better idea. He gave the mechanic a once over with a different intent, and his eyes landed on biceps and ass and that ridiculous sharp beard.

Yeah, Bucky was onto something.

And the mechanic’s head tilted just right, shoulders opened just enough, and that was definite interest. Steve tamped down his smile so it wasn’t too obvious. The road could be lonely, even with Bucky, and it was nice to have company of all kinds.

“Be happy to,” the mechanic answered with a broad grin.

Rhodes rolled his eyes. “I’m definitely out of here.”

Steve laughed and hopped up into the back of the truck. “Let’s get my bike out of your way before we take up even more of your time. Thank you so much for stopping, we really appreciate it.”

Between the four of them it was easy enough to get the motorcycle off the back of the truck. Steve hopped down and shook Rhodes’ hand in thanks.

Rhodes went on his way, and Steve realized he never got the mechanic’s name.

“I’m Steve, by the way.” He held out his hand to the mechanic.

“I guess that’s a better name than ‘handsome.’” Tony grinned as he took Steve’s hand, leaving a few black marks behind. “I’m Tony.”

“What have you been calling me?” Bucky asked, grinning. “Maybe I’ll like that better than my name.”

Steve shook his head and left them to it, wheeling his bike up into the shop. Tony waved for him to put it anywhere, and so Steve propped it on the side of the open bay.

“Your shop have a name?” Bucky asked as he wheeled his bike next to Steve’s.

“Tony’s,” he said with a wink. “Usually just get the locals, not too many out of towners make it

here so not much use in branding. Surprised you guys made the turn."

"Wouldn't have seen it, except Rhodes picked us up on the highway."

Tony tilted his head in curiosity. "Guess that explains it. Small town generosity, and all that jazz."

"He said you were one of the best." Bucky's voice had just the right heat to be taken anyway Tony wanted.

"He's not wrong." Tony's smile was all welcome, but his gaze flicked to Steve.

Steve smiled back, hoping it showed his own interest.

"I have to thank him for bringing you to me. Always happy to get my hand on beauties like these." Tony's voice went from slightly flirty to professional. "Though I'll have to special order the tire, don't have those on hand. It'll take some time to get that in, but if you're in a hurry we can get you a ride to Galaxy Motors in the next town over. I can vouch for Rocket, he's a decent mechanic, and they should have your parts on hand."

Steve licked his lips and thought it over. Obviously Bucky liked Tony, and Tony was receptive to Bucky, and was probably receptive to Steve, and Steve was liking Tony fine but - did they risk bringing their enemies to this town's doorsteps? How far ahead were they, and how much could they relax?

He traded a quick glance with Bucky, but that only told him that Bucky would follow whatever Steve wanted.

They had to get the bike fixed, and a bit of extra time couldn't hurt them that much. Not when that turn off the highway was practically impossible to see.

"We're not in a rush," Steve said. "If you don't mind us hanging around."

"Not at all," Tony assured, and the smile on his face redirected to Steve's bike. He ran his hands lightly over the surface in a caress. "I'll get that tire on its way today and have both of your bikes in top working condition in no time."

"Don't work too fast. We want to see the sights." Bucky winked at Steve.

"My door is always open, no worries about that."

"Good," Steve said, and then took a breath. He needed to insert himself into this, let Tony know that it was both Steve and Bucky. "Nice to get off the road for a bit, loosen the muscles."

Bucky smirked, and Steve tried to tamp down the heat crawling up his face. It wasn't his finest pick-up line, but he was out of practice.

"You two are certainly too young to get all stiff," Tony said, brown eyes warm and twinkling. "How about you get all warmed up in the coffee shop across the street? Tell Maria it's on me. I'll get that tire ordered and give both your bikes a quick check-up and see what else might be on the menu."

"Sounds great," Steve said faintly.

He needed a moment to recover before he tried flirting with Tony again. A cup of coffee sounded just like the break he needed.

And it'd give Steve something to toss in Bucky's face when that laughter he was holding back with a hand over his mouth finally burst out.

The coffee shop across the street was decorated unlike any other coffee shop Steve had seen. There were planes dangling from the ceiling, photographs and schematics from the Air Force on the walls.

Bucky whistled his admiration as he stepped closer to a breakdown schematic of a Spirit bomber.

"Hey there, how can I help you folks?" The black woman in a bright yellow tee and a dark green apron behind the counter had a welcoming smile, and Steve appreciated it with all the subtle stares they were both getting from the few other people in the shop.

"Hi there, we just came from Tony's." Steve thumbed towards the shop, then felt stupid. Of course Maria knew who he meant, and had probably seen them walk over.

"We heard the bikes. Or, bike," Maria's smile was amused but still warm. "I'm sure Tony is pleased as anything to get his hands on that."

"He was." Bucky popped up at Steve's shoulder. "Nice decoration on this place. Is it connected to the Air Force?"

"Ex-pilot," Maria said, pointing to herself. "Same for my partners. Not the usual for a coffee shop, but it's what we like."

"We're both ex-Army," Steve admitted.

"Oh no, don't know if I can serve you two." Maria winked.

"I can!" A little girl bounced off her seat in the corner and ran behind the counter. "Can I, Mom? Can I?"

"This is my daughter Monica," Maria put her hands on her daughter's shoulders "and to have her tell it she knows her way around the coffee machine better than me."

"I'm really good!" Monica chirped.

"I bet you are," Steve said. "What's your favorite?"

"Hot chocolate."

"Mine too." Steve winked at her. "I'd love your hot chocolate, if that's okay with your mom."

Maria patted Monica's back. "Off you go, one hot chocolate."

Monica saluted and then grabbed a cup and scampered down the counter.

Bucky ordered a latte and whatever Tony's favorite was, which turned out to be a red-eye. Rather than put it on Tony's tab, because that was too generous, Steve pulled out his wallet and handed over enough cash to cover all the drinks.

“I know Tony didn’t send you over here to pay for his coffee,” Maria chided. “Or else I got to talk to that boy.”

“No, but it’s the least we can do.”

“I think he’d pay you for the chance to touch those bikes,” Maria said as she took the cash. “Take some of the scones before they go stale, and those will go on his tab. The blueberry ones are his favorite.”

“Leave some for the rest of us though,” a woman’s voice piped up from behind Steve.

Steve turned, and a red-haired woman with curls smiled at him. “I’m not afraid to fight you for them if need be.”

“I’ve got your order packed up, Peggy, don’t you worry,” Maria said.

Peggy still introduced herself to them, and Steve and Bucky followed in kind.

“I run the bed and breakfast a few streets over, but it’s Maria’s talents that I set out for breakfast,” she confided.

“You got space for two more?” Maria asked, gesturing to Steve and Bucky. “In case you two need to spend a night. Peggy’s place is the only type of hotel we’ve got around here.”

Peggy frowned. “No, I’m sorry. I have a family gathering happening and I’m full up.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Steve assured.

“Of all the timing,” Peggy said, exasperated. “We usually only get the in-laws around the holidays. The one time we’d be useful for more than sparing family drama! I’d hate to make you travel, especially if your transportation is laid up with Tony.”

“Maybe Tony could be the answer,” Maria said. “He’s got that guest house in the back.”

“Yes he does.” Peggy’s look was stern, and Steve almost ducked his head expecting to be reprimanded. “Ask Tony about that, and if he says it’s unavailable, come back to me. We’ll find you something. I swear, the one time Daniel and I can be useful, our niece has an engagement party.”

“Congratulations to your niece.” Steve was shocked and a touch guilty for all the kindness that everyone had shown them so far. He understood neighbor helping neighbor, even if that wasn’t the impression people had of those growing up in New York City, but this was beyond the hospitality Steve could’ve expected. He appreciated it, but also wasn’t sure he liked this spotlight.

“Thank you, we’re very excited for her.”

“We’ll be sure to ask Tony about that guest house,” Bucky said. “Thanks for thinking ahead for us.”

They stepped out of the way and let Peggy and Maria chat about the new line of tea. Their drinks were finished soon enough, and they walked out of the coffee shop laden down with drinks and a box of scones.

Tony welcomed them back with open arms.

“Blueberry scones? My favorite!”

And Steve knew it was too soon. He didn’t know the man, or even have evidence that he was a competent mechanic, but the bright smile on Tony’s face made Steve warm.

He wouldn’t mind causing that smile again.

Chapter 3

In his defense, the smell of Maria's coffee caught Tony's attention first. Then it was the two beautiful men who brought him coffee and the box of -

"Blueberry scones! My favorite! " Tony cheered and popped up from checking over Bucky's bike. He gave his hands a cursory swipe with the rag, then grabbed a scone and shoved in a mouthful.

There'd be streaks of oil and whatever on the next few bites, but Tony was sure he'd built up immunity to everything in the shop by now.

"Maria said they were your favorite," Steve said, amused.

"To die for," Tony swore. "You tried one yet? You'll understand. Or better - don't. More for me."

The coffee and scones went on top of a semi-cleared tool chest, and then Bucky went for the box.

"Sorry sunshine, you have to share." Bucky took a bite, hummed his approval, and went back for a bigger bite.

Tony winked at him. "Told you."

"I suppose we should tell you the scones went on your tab because we tried to pay for the coffee," Steve said, sheepish.

Tony waved away his embarrassment. "Of course, you can't sneak one over on Maria like that. She knows. We all blame Monica, little troublemaker. She in the shop?"

"She's sweet! Made my hot chocolate." Steve cradled his cup to his chest.

"It's always the sweet ones that are deceptive." Tony chuckled and grabbed the cup with his name on it. He took a good long drink to rinse down the scone bits.

When he put the cup down again, he saw that both Steve and Bucky's gazes were on him. Internally he preened, glad he still had some sort of charm.

It was a small town and the prospects were slim. Most of the glances that Tony caught around here was because he was doing something that other people considered crazy - like hanging Christmas lights on the water tower using the hover board he'd needed to test. Two birds, one stone, and the tower had looked great.

After Rhodey had fixed it into something more aesthetically pleasing than 'Stark Town,' but still.

After sixteen years the name Alderon got boring sometimes.

"We have another favor to ask." Steve rubbed the back of his head. "And no worries if it's a 'no.' We'll figure something out."

"You've got to ask me first," Tony said.

"We ran into the woman who runs the bed and breakfast - Peggy? She said she was full up with family, a niece's engagement party."

Tony snapped his fingers. "Oh right! Sharon! I forgot that was this weekend." Speaking of, he

needed to finish programming the fireworks display for their actual wedding. He knew it would need a test run or two before he'd feel comfortable.

Then his brain caught up with the reason that information was important. "You need a place to stay! Of course, of course, no chance these puppies are getting done and back on the road today. If I had the parts, I could make it work, but since I don't - anyway, I have a guest house. It's only one bed, but has a bathroom and mini kitchen, it's own set of keys so you can come and go as you'd like."

"We hate to impose, but -" Steve started.

Tony waved away the protest. "No imposition. I'm happy for the chance to work these beauties over and make them purr." He reached out and patted one of the handles. He could tell they were well taken care of, but he couldn't wait to bury his hands on their insides and see how they were ticking. "I should mention the place is a few miles outside of town, if that matters. We can find you something else if you'd rather stay in town, the heart of all this action." Tony grinned.

"Sounds peaceful. We'll take it, if you really don't mind." Bucky smiled back, and there was definite flirtation there. "We've never had a problem sharing."

Tony didn't think sharing the bed was going to be a problem for these two, not with the signals they've been giving off. And oh, how Tony was tempted.

Even more tempted, now that they'd be sleeping just there behind his house, which meant it was time for him to be the adult and lay down all the cards. Or at least the one important card.

"Great! Plan was to finish up a few more things here and grab pizza for dinner. Lucky's is the only place in town, but that works since it's Peter's favorite. Peter being my son."

There, information disclosed and out in the open. Tony didn't regret Peter, not in the slightest. Peter was the best thing to happen to Tony's life, even if parenthood wasn't a walk in the park. But flirting had a tendency to die with the knowledge that Tony was a parent, either because people got cold feet - their mind skipping ahead to committing to be a step-parent before the first date - or thought that single parents didn't deserve fun nights anymore.

He was a single parent, and the sooner Bucky and Steve knew that the sooner they could all move on.

"How old?" Steve asked, open and interested.

Bucky had stilled, but Tony tried not to focus on that.

"Sixteen. Moved out here not long after he was born, out of the big city and into small town life. It's been good." He smiled softly, remembering. It didn't feel like only sixteen years ago he could hold Peter with one arm.

His baby had changed so much, and Tony and the town along with him.

Tony didn't know what he would've done if Rhodey hadn't come up with the idea of moving. There were too many watchful eyes in New York City.

"That's amazing," Steve said, smiling. "Does he take after you? Help around the shop?"

"In that way he does." Tony laughed, shaking his head. "He likes knowing how things work, and is good with the mechanics. Fortunately he doesn't in others. He's a good kid, better than I ever was.

I was a terror."

"I know the type." Bucky elbowed a protesting Steve. "Does he take after his mom then?"

Tony blinked in surprise. "Wouldn't know," he admitted. He hadn't had to tell this story in so long he forgot that not everyone in the world knew it. "She was a one-night stand, and she met someone soon after. I kept my distance - they were a cute couple, and she was nice enough to keep in the loop, you know? But there was a car crash not long after Peter was born. I got custody, and there's an aunt and uncle on Richard's side but," Tony shrugged, "Mary doesn't have any family left."

"I'm sorry for your loss, and Peter's," Bucky said. "That's hard."

"It is," Tony accepted. Fortunately he'd had Rhodey, Carol, and Maria to help him figure things out. Maria had practically used Peter as practice for her own child someday, and Tony had returned the babysitting favors with Monica. "We keep on going, and she'd be proud of who Peter is." Tony dove for another conversation topic to lighten the mood. "Sounds like you two have known each other forever, though."

They both chuckled and nudged each other.

"Childhood friends," Bucky admitted. "Families lived in apartments on the same block. Rode the same school bus, played catch in the back alley, that kind of thing."

"You each other's coming out story?" Tony pressed, curious.

Steve laughed and Bucky blushed.

"No way," Steve said. "This one was a playboy, had all the boys and girls after him. I was nothing but a little sickly kid, five feet nothing and coughing all the time."

"Pull the other one," Tony protested as he eyed Steve's broad shoulders.

Steve shrugged. "Believe it."

Bucky sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "True enough I guess, though you weren't *nothing*. I just didn't have my head on straight with the feelings and hormones and all that."

"Who does at that age?" Tony added in with humor. "Not that age fixes things. Even small towns have their romantic drama, but at least you two seem to be on the same page now?" He hoped he wasn't overstepping, but they were comfortable in each other's space and both flirting with him without any competitive edging so -

"We're together," Steve confirmed, smile bright while Bucky's was warm and fond.

Then Bucky turned to Tony, eyes darkening. "And known to share."

Tony swallowed his smirk with a sip of coffee. Bucky's hesitance must've been over the question of whether Tony was single rather than over the parent aspect. Those bedroom eyes he was giving Tony now had no brakes.

It had been a few years since Tony had done anything that would be the talk of the town. He had to be past due - and he certainly wasn't going to stand aside and give Steve and Bucky a chance to find someone else.

"I think it's time to order up some pizzas and get home, don't you?"

Chapter 4

In hindsight, Tony shouldn't have suggested pizza.

Not that the pizza was bad, even though it was the only pizza place in town and could stoop to ridiculously low levels before anyone bothered to go for pizza anywhere else.

It was the service. Particularly one Clint Barton who took one look at Tony walking in with Steve and Bucky behind him and whose eyes lit up with mischief.

"Look what the dog dragged in," Clint greeted. He hopped up to sit on the counter and grinned at them. "Someone's having a party and didn't invite me."

"You aren't buff enough." Tony leaned around Clint and waved to Kate who was pulling one pizza from the oven. Three half-topped pies waited on the counter for her to return. "Why does she let you work here again?"

"Adult supervision?"

"Ha! You don't qualify," Kate said.

"Took the words right out of my mouth."

Clint put his hands over his heart, face falling. "Wounded. I'm so wounded. You're hurting me right in front of these new people, and they'll never respect me."

"For the best." Tony grimaced and forced the introductions out. "Clint, this is Steve and Bucky. They've got bike trouble and are at my mercy. Total blow out on the rear tire, probably means a suspension problem. All too common in someone who rides soft tail but needs a rigid frame. It's a finesse thing," he turned to explain to Steve. "You're a little direct. I can tell." He winked to soften what wasn't meant to be a blow and was rewarded with a flush scrawling across Steve's face.

"Told you so," Bucky murmured.

"I swear this pizza is better than it seems with this kind of welcoming," Tony said. "Kate can take our order."

"Nope." Clint popped the word out of his mouth. "You get me, you lucky lot. Thanks for stopping in so I can see what all the gossip's been about."

"You're welcome?" Steve offered with a confused smile, chinks still pink.

Clint craned his neck to see behind Steve and Bucky, though it was a tough job given the breadth of their shoulders. "Where's my little Petie Pie? You need his stack of 'everything but black olives' pizza or is this a *private* party?"

His smile was lascivious and Tony scowled, hackles rising.

"Is that any of your business?" Steve's voice was cool.

Clint winked. "Got to know what pizzas to order."

Shaking his head, Tony prepared himself to face down an interrogation from the town tomorrow.

He ordered a couple pizzas of Peter's favorites and prompted Bucky and Steve to pick out whatever they wanted. Then realized they should just try everything on the menu, and ordered two of everything while Clint laughed at him.

"This is why you're our favorite customer," Clint said gleefully as he punched in the order. "Keep the whole place running all by yourself."

"Keeps Peter from eating the furniture." Handing over his credit card, Tony waved off Steve and Bucky's protests over the payment. "You should tell these guys the origin of the purple dog decor." Turning to Steve and Bucky, he explained, "he loves to tell the story but we've all heard it a million times."

Not that Tony wanted to hear it again, but he wanted to distract them from wondering how a small town mechanic could afford this much pizza.

"A million and one now." But Clint jumped right into telling Steve and Bucky about the dog Lucky - no longer allowed in the restaurant thanks to the miserly food inspectors - and how much Lucky loved pizza.

With Clint dragging the story on and on, adding flourishes and embellishments that Kate heckled as they made the pizzas, he barely wrapped up before Tony's order was done.

"Give Lucky my best," Tony said as he took a stack of pizza boxes, hot and full.

Bucky and Steve both carried their own stacks, and Tony realized he might've gone overboard on the pizza as they struggled to find places to stash all the boxes in Tony's car. The Audi was cramped with too much pizza and too much of Steve and Bucky folded up under boxes in the backseat. Before he did anything else Tony cracked the windows and let the cool evening air ease some of the cramp.

The best thing about small towns was the lack of traffic. Pulling away from the curb, Tony opened up the engine and gunned it. Bucky whooped as the night roared past, bleeding off the last of the moist heat and the smells of too many toppings. Happy should be with Pepper tonight, eliminating the risk of being pulled over and enduring a misguided but well-meant interrogation of Steve, Bucky, and the suspicious number of pizzas.

Tony checked the clock, bit back a curse, and put the pedal to the floor. This time Steve cheered, head out the window.

"That purr," Bucky said, meeting Tony's eyes in the rear view mirror.

"She runs well," Tony accepted as he grinned back.

He turned onto a side road, barely checking his speed. Showing off a little for his appreciative audience, he was glad he'd had the twisty deathtrap paved. Trees clung to either side, the dense forest pushing out over the winding path. Normally he'd slow down, if only for the sake of the pizza, but Steve and Bucky seemed to have things well in hand.

They sailed through the night, eating the miles between town and home. The house was remote, no doubt about it, but they made good time. Pulling up to the garage, Tony cut the engine—it was a nice night, no reason to risk Steve and Bucky seeing that he had a *collection* of pricey cars—and gave a low whistle. The porch lights flickered on, and he grinned in response.

They carried the pizzas inside and Tony called out, "Peter, dinner! And we've got guests!"

He glanced over the house with fresh eyes and was relieved it wasn't too messy. Jarvis wouldn't have approved, but surprise guests who were about to eat their weight in pizza could deal with it. He set his pizza boxes down on a free chair and then swiped a few papers and books off the counter for Bucky and Steve to unload.

The lack of thundering footsteps made Tony frown. "Peter? There's pizza!"

"That should do it," Bucky said, smile tugging at his mouth.

A door slammed, and there were the racing footsteps Tony had expected. Peter slid into the kitchen. "Did you say pizza?" His eyes went wide as he saw Steve and Bucky, and he gave a small wave. "Oh, hi. I'm Peter."

"There is pizza and guests," Tony said, amused. He did the introductions as he handed out plates. "They're going to be staying in the guest house while I fix their motorcycles. Peggy's is full up for Sharon's party."

"Cool," was all Peter said before diving into his boxes labeled with Clint's shorthand scrawl of PP for 'Petie Pie.'

Tony sighed. "Guests first. Other people did try to instill manners into this child, I swear."

"Sorry," Peter said, sheepish as he set the box back down.

"No, go ahead." Bucky waved Peter on. "I know better than to get between a teenager's stomach and food."

Peter didn't need another invitation. He used the pizza box as a plate as he dug right in, shoving a piece into his mouth before he'd sat down at the dinner table.

"How was school?" Tony asked as he poked through the boxes alongside Steve and Bucky, choosing pieces to add to his plate.

"Nothing exciting. Same old stuff."

"I didn't get a call about you blowing anything up in chem lab. That's new."

He was glad to share interests in the sciences with Peter. He'd worried at first that he'd turn out like Howard, pushing and pushing and pushing until every drop of achievement could be wrung out as early as possible. So far, everyone told him he hadn't done that, wasn't doing that, and Tony could enjoy doing science experiments with Peter.

Even if Peter's science teachers didn't always appreciate the advanced knowledge in the area of explosions.

When Bucky sat next to Peter and took over asking him questions - about his classes and other activities he was involved with - Tony raised a questioning eyebrow.

Steve sat down next to Bucky and grinned, but didn't join the conversation. He leaned over to Tony and quietly explained, "He grew up the oldest of four. He's always been good with kids."

Tony could see it as Peter opened right up. Shaking his head, he wondered if he was getting played. Someone had formed these two out of Tony's deepest and surprisingly most wholesome desires.

Bucky pulled his lower lip into his mouth while he squinted at something Peter was explaining.

Tony would very much like to chase after that lip and taste it, pull it into his own mouth - he blinked. Okay, so not just wholesome desires.

“Single child myself. Bit of a learning curve,” Tony admitted.

“Same for me,” Steve said. “Not the learning curve, I don’t have any kids yet. But my mom was a single parent too, and she did a great job. Even though she had her work cut out for her.”

Bucky broke in, “Yes she did. Kid Stevie was sick all the time. Just a small, skinny fella. Good thing she was a nurse or he’d never have left the hospital.”

“No way,” Peter protested. “You were small?”

“Complete shrimp,” Bucky insisted. “Couldn’t run a block without getting an asthma attack and nearly died every winter of whatever flu was going around. He kept us on our toes.”

“Bucky,” Steve sighed, rolling his eyes. “Do we really have to go into this?”

“I’m providing evidence.” Bucky raised his hands defensively.

“What did you do?” Peter leaned forward, staring at Steve. “Did you eat buckets of that protein power stuff or something? You look like you can bench press a car now.”

Steve shrugged, a blush working up his neck. “I hit a growth spurt? I don’t know, it was crazy.”

He shot Bucky a look that Tony couldn’t decipher, which was never a good sign. Time to change the subject.

“I wish I could get one of those,” Peter said bitterly.

“Be grateful you can eat as much as you do and still fit through the door.” Tony gestured to the stack of pizza boxes, where Peter was already on his second. “The rest of us have to deal with slow metabolism.”

Peter slouched in his chair. “Yeah, yeah.”

Tony rolled his eyes and Steve stifled a laugh.

“Kids these days.” Bucky winked at Tony. “Don’t know how good they have it.”

That prompted a snort from Tony. Like Bucky or Steve had any legs to stand on with the way they were able to pack the pizza away and still look like that.

Tony steered the conversation back to Steve and Bucky and their travels. The pair shared some of their funnier stories, of people they’d met and places they’d seen on the road. Tony found himself wistful of far off places - it’d been before Peter that he could travel like he had no roots - but it faded as he glanced at his son.

Who was listening to Bucky talk about trudging through a swamp with too much envy. Maybe Tony could book a few more vacations when school was out.

“Grab as much of that as you want,” Tony said, nodding to the pizza when dinner was finished and Peter had dashed off to his room. “There’s a mini-kitchen in the guest house so if you get the midnight munchies you don’t have to go far. I’ll give you the tour, and if there’s something missing we can run back to town.”

“Thanks so much for this, we really appreciate it,” Steve said, those dangerous blue eyes of his wide and sincere.

“No problem,” Tony brushed off, deliberately looking away from the stupidly tempting sincerity as he led them to the back porch.

The backyard lit up as they stepped outside, the sun beginning to set behind the trees. Tony had inlaid stones into the ground for an easy walking path to the guest house two summers back, and they followed the trail further into the woods.

“More privacy than you’d get at Peggy’s, so at least there’s that.”

Tony showed them the lock on the door that required a four digit code - he set it to the number Steve gave him, and they were set for as long as they needed.

Relief swept through him as the house seemed in perfect order. It was a small place, with a cozy living room, mini-kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom. Better than a hotel room anyway, especially for two beefy bikers.

“Unfortunately, I can’t offer you any of Peggy’s wonderful service, but we can go back to town if you need something. And feel free to come up to the house for anything, too. There’s an alarm set on the place, but it’ll recognize you.”

“How does that work?” Bucky asked, looking intrigued.

“Cameras and some facial recognition software I tweaked for my own use.”

“You hiding state secrets or something?” Steve’s grin was sly.

Tony laughed. “No government stooges here, just something I like to do for fun. Keeps me busy.”

“That’s amazing,” Bucky said.

Tony warmed at the awe in Bucky’s voice. “There’s a few fun upgrades around the place. Not too much in here, though. Edwin and Ana liked things simple, wouldn’t even use an electric kettle for tea, that kind of thing.”

When Bucky and Steve only nodded, looking around the place, Tony decided it was time for him to vacate. He clapped his hands. “I guess I’ll let you get settled in?”

“We’re used to traveling light, got what we need in our bags.” Bucky stuck his hands in his pockets and gave Tony a heavy look. “You busy tonight, any chance we could get a drink or something?”

Want surged through Tony again, just as hot as it’d been back at the garage.

“Don’t feel obligated because you’re -” Tony waved around the guest house. “Payment not required.”

“Don’t mean we can’t be grateful,” Bucky said as he stepped in close. “Appreciative. Interested.”

“This way is less awkward than if we were at the other place.” Steve shrugged, a small smile on his face. “Logistics are easier. I mean, if you want to -”

“Yeah,” Tony said, because how often was he going to get a chance like this? “Why don’t I get us some drinks? There’s a few chairs out back, and there’s a great view of the mountains and the stars when the sun sets.”

“Not the only view that’s nice,” Steve rushed out, sincerity practically beaming out of him.

Tony was charmed despite himself, grinning at Steve while Bucky snickered into his fist.

He winked. “Just wait until I walk away to get those drinks.”

Chapter 5

Bucky woke up on the world's most comfortable mattress. Or, if not the world's, then at least the most comfortable mattress he'd ever touched in his life.

He hugged the pillow to his face and hummed in appreciation.

"I'm going for a run." Even Steve's weight on the edge of the bed as he sat didn't roll Bucky to one side. Best mattress ever. "Want to come or are you going to laze about here?"

Bucky peeked over at the clock. "Six in the morning doesn't qualify as 'lazing about,' but also I live on this mattress now."

Steve snorted, lacing up his running shoes. "Have fun with that."

"I will." Only, now that Bucky was awake, he was starting to get hungry. "Bring me breakfast on your way back."

"And what does His Majesty require?"

Coffee sounded heavenly, and so did bacon and eggs. Waffles or pancakes? And blueberries on top, or maybe strawberries. The real question was if he was willing to roll off this mattress and cook that breakfast, or have Steve run around town until he found a diner.

But then cooking breakfast could be a great way to say thanks to Tony for letting them stay.

Another thank you, or at least a different one. Last night had been something more than gratitude.

Last night had him thinking about staying another few nights.

Morning after breakfasts were usually his domain, so Bucky groaned and levered himself out of bed. "Let's go check out the kitchen and see."

"You're cooking? Oh, you're *cooking*." Steve smirked at him, and Bucky grabbed a shirt crumpled on the floor and flung it at Steve's face.

"What, you don't want me to?"

"I didn't say that."

Steve eyed him, too shrewd and knowing for so early in the morning, and Bucky rubbed his face so he didn't have to meet that gaze.

"Come on, we'll probably need you to hit up the grocery store on your way back. Let's hope Tony's alarm recognizes us like he said it would."

After Bucky found some fresh clothing, they retraced the path back to the house. The sun was peeking over the horizon, with the air crisp and wet.

Bucky could get used to this view.

"How long do you think it'll take Tony to get your bike fixed?"

"As long as it takes. Don't know when the parts will come on." Steve laid a hand on his shoulder

and squeezed. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”

A wisp of regret wound around Bucky’s heart. It wasn’t that he didn’t like traveling and seeing new places. It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy standing up for kids, protecting them with Steve at his side.

It was that sometimes he wanted a home, a place to rest that wasn’t another cheap motel. New York wasn’t home anymore, and he didn’t care about returning to it.

This, here, in the mountains. This suited him fine.

But they had to keep moving. Bucky knew that.

If anything, he wanted to know what else Tony would come up with. After coming clean about the alarm, Bucky had coaxed more of Tony’s inventions and talents out of him as they sat on the back porch, drinking and talking until the moon had risen and judged them all.

Bucky was in awe of the man, and he waved Steve back and approached the back door of the house with caution. He creaked the door open, tensing for an alarm, but the morning remained quiet as he stepped inside.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

“We’re clear? I can come in now?” Steve grumbled.

“Sure, let’s see if your two left feet will set off the alarm.”

Steve stepped inside, eyes on the ceiling, but again no alarm. Bucky nodded, impressed at Tony’s brilliance.

Bucky led the way to the kitchen. Tony had said they were welcome, and he hoped that covered cooking. He poked around the pantry and fridge to check for ingredients, pleased at what he’d found.

“Mostly set,” he told Steve. “Could do with some eggs in case there were plans for those, but hard to run with probably. Some sausage would be good. And some strawberries or whatever fruit looks good to go on the waffles.”

“Sausage, strawberries. Got it. You sure you’re good?”

Bucky waved him off. “Go run before you start vibrating around the kitchen.”

It was a side effect. When Steve was a kid, he barely had enough energy to make the walk to school, not that it stopped him from throwing himself into fights. Now he had enough stamina that he needed to go for miles long runs in the morning or he’d never be able to sit on a bike for hours.

The same strength hit Bucky differently. He didn’t vibrate out of his skin with it, kept still unless the moment called. Then he struck.

Right now the only thing to attack was cooking breakfast, and Bucky pulled out his ingredients. He could hear a shower running and other movements, and if Bucky had to guess it’d be Tony.

He found frying pans but no waffle maker, so the waffle batter turned into pancakes. Bucky had just plated the first few when light footsteps raced down the stairs and skidded into the kitchen.

“Oh, uh - hi?”

Bucky smiled at Peter, whose hair was still tousled with bed head. “Hi, sorry to barge in on you. Wanted to cook you and your dad breakfast as a thank you for letting us stay. If you like pancakes?”

He set the stack he had on the counter.

Peter’s surprise morphed into excitement. “Yeah, I love pancakes! Thanks!”

“Steve is on a run, but he should be back with sausage and some fruit too. I can also make eggs, if you like.”

“You don’t have to,” Peter said, looking guilty with a mouthful of pancakes.

“I like it, if there’s people to eat it,” Bucky said. “Scrambled okay? And I saw some cheese in there, and if that sounds good I can mix that in too.”

“Yeah, that’d be awesome,” Peter admitted around another bite. “These are really great! Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Thanks for hosting us.”

Bucky grinned, pleased, and turned back to the stove to pour out a few more pancakes. Then he started on cracking and beating the eggs.

He’d pulled out the cheese from the fridge when Tony came down, who didn’t seem surprised to find Bucky in his kitchen.

“Rhodey couldn’t have known he was blessing me with a live-in chef when he dropped you off at the shop or he’d have had you over at his place.”

“Don’t think it came up,” Bucky agreed, smile more tentative now as he searched for a reaction.

“Can you guys stay forever? This is delicious. Better than a Pop-tart to go and all that -”

“Shit, you’ve got school.” Bucky’s eyes widened. “And now I’m swearing. Shi -” he swallowed the last one, ducking his head and wincing at Tony.

“Not like I don’t hear it at school,” Peter said.

“But not in this house. Unless I say them, then it’s allowed.” Tony winked at Bucky. “I don’t suppose there’s coffee? I’m not convinced I’m not dreaming yet, oh wow there’s *pancakes*. Pete, you’ve got five minutes then you need to be on the road.”

“Forgot the coffee,” Bucky admitted.

“Perfect! Now I don’t have to pretend I like how you make it.” Tony beamed as he grabbed the coffee grounds out of the cabinet.

Bucky laughed and went back to the stove. The eggs were mostly done, so he added the cheese and gave it a bit more time on the stove before he dumped them onto a fresh plate. He offered it to Peter, who with a mouth full of syrupy pancakes took it with a grateful nod.

“Eggs? Or pancakes? I won’t be offended if it’s not your breakfast fare,” Bucky said to Tony.

“Yes to both. Not my usual breakfast fare, but that’s for lack of talent rather than taste.” Tony’s face was warm and open as he looked at Bucky. “So thank you. Peter, did you say thank you?”

“He did,” Bucky answered for him since the kid’s mouth was full again.

Bucky started on another batch of scrambled eggs when Steve walked in, sweaty and flush, bag in hand.

“Good morning!” Steve called cheerily, not at all out of breath.

“Were you running?” Tony asked, his tone surprised, impressed, and disgusted all at once. “Right now? This early? *Really*?”

“He’s like that,” Bucky dismissed. “You get what I need? Sorry, Peter, probably no chance for sausage but we can get some strawberries on those last bits of pancakes if you want.”

“No strawberries,” Steve said as he brought the bag to Bucky. “The owner Natasha knew where I was saying and said blueberries were Tony’s favorite.”

“That is true,” Tony said as he poured himself a mug of coffee. “How kind of her.”

“She also only let me get the turkey sausage,” Steve admitted.

Tony’s face twisted. “Now she’s just being nosy.”

“She said you’d say that.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Did she say that I’d say ‘stay out of my business?’ No, don’t answer, I know she did and then threatened to withhold her recipes.”

Steve nodded, and Bucky was intrigued by this Natasha.

“As long as some of those blueberries make it into some pancakes I won’t hold it against her.” Tony sniffed and took a long sip of his coffee.

“I’ll make sure it’s done,” Bucky promised as he set the pint of blueberries aside.

There was the honk of a car horn outside.

“Ned! I have to go, but this was really good, Mr. Bucky, thank you,” Peter said as he stood from the table, shoving the last forkful into his mouth.

“Go, go, don’t forget your bag,” Tony said as he waved. “Make good choices.”

Peter rolled his eyes and dashed back to his room.

“Steve, you should go shower before you stink up the place,” Bucky said as he washed the blueberries.

“I’m going, I’m going,” Steve said, hands raised in defense.

“We’ll save you some pancakes,” Tony promised. Then he took a bite and hummed. “Or maybe not.”

The watch on Tony’s wrist chirped, and he frowned down at it. With a few taps, a holographic screen popped up, and Bucky gaped in awe. That was movie-like technology.

“Did you make that?” Steve asked, suspicious.

Frowning, Bucky set his excitement aside. Steve had merit in wondering why a guy who claimed to be a small town mechanic could make stuff like this - and still only be a small town mechanic.

Peter leapt down the steps and raced for the front door. He turned the knob, but the door didn't open.

"Peter -" Tony's voice was a warning.

"FRIDAY, let me out. I have to get to school."

Bucky reached out, slowly as to not draw attention to himself, and turned off the stove. Then he grabbed a knife and slipped it into his pocket, just in case.

Steve was tensing, shifting his weight to defend.

"Get Ned inside!" Tony snapped, still staring at the hologram that was flashing red. "Both of you, safe room."

Eyes wide, Peter jerked the door open and ran outside.

"What's happening?" Steve asked.

Tony tapped at the hologram for another long moment before he gave them his full attention. His warm brown eyes were serious and flashing with anger.

"There's an attack. No time to explain. We have a safe room, Peter will lead you to it, you'll be fine."

"Attack by who?" Steve pressed.

"People who will kill you without asking questions," Tony said, unyielding as he strode for the garage. "Follow Peter, you'll be safe."

Steve followed Tony instead, and Bucky trailed after them. Adrenaline surged in his veins, but he calmed himself and watched as Tony headed for a cabinet at the back garage wall.

"Get inside."

"Tell us what's happening. We can help," Steve insisted.

"I'll handle this. *Go*."

Bucky bit his lip. It would give them away to ask directly if it was Hydra. Whoever it was, Tony didn't seem surprised or scared - only angry.

"Come on," Bucky said, tugging at Steve's arm. "Steve, come on."

"But -"

"He said he's got it. Come on, let's go make sure Peter and his friend are safe."

Steve clenched his jaw, but Bucky was able to tug him away from Tony. Tony gave Bucky one sharp nod in thanks and then turned away, the cabinet opening up to show video screens that displayed different areas of the property. A keyboard and a console popped out of a cabinet.

"Talk to me, FRIDAY," Tony said as they closed the door behind them.

“There you are,” Peter said, relieved.

Another boy trailed Peter who stared at them in wonder. “Wow, who are you guys?”

“The mayor found them on the road with a broken bike and -”

“Explain in the safe room, kid,” Bucky interrupted kindly. “That somewhere nearby?”

“Right! This way,” Peter said and trotted off.

“This is so much better than the morning Calc quiz,” Ned said as he followed.

Bucky and Steve trailed the boys down a hallway, though another room, then down a staircase into the basement. A sharp corner later, and Peter was pressing his hand into a keypad for a scan.

With an accepting beep, the section of the wall slid open.

The walls here were over a foot thick - thick enough to withstand missile firepower, Bucky guessed, as he knocked on the metal that would guard them.

“Shouldn’t your dad be in here too?” Steve asked as they stepped inside.

It was an even smaller version of the guest house. There was a mini kitchen and a small bathroom. In the bedroom, there were bunks lining the wall instead of the most comfortable mattress of Bucky’s life.

A safe room and a shelter, with food rations and water bottles tucked into corners. Tony was prepared for the end of the world, and Bucky wasn’t sure what make of that.

In the main room, there were screens that displayed the same outside images that Bucky had seen from Tony’s cabinet. So far, nothing but nature was on the screen.

Peter gulped and stared at the videos. “He said he had it handled, and by now the whole town knows. People will come.”

“Of course they will,” Ned said, wrapping an arm around Peter’s shoulders.

“What’s the threat?” Steve pushed.

Bucky clenched his fists, his nails biting into his palms. Should they fight this threat? They shouldn’t blow their cover, not here. It was too small of a town for the rumors not to spread, for the tales not to linger for Hydra to sniff out and question.

They shouldn’t have stopped in such a small place, even if it had been so tempting. A place to rest, to relax, with good kind people.

“We’ve got vehicles approaching the perimeter,” a feminine voice said through the speakers.

A black SUV on the road flashed by on the screen, and then Steve was gone - sliding back through the doors and racing up the stairs.

“Stay here,” Bucky barked at the kids and then dashed after him.

He’d seen what Steve had, that the black SUVs were bulletproof. That they had military grade tires, that they were loaded down with what would probably be heavy weaponry. It was Hydra, because they didn’t have good enough luck for it to be anyone else. And whoever Tony might be

expecting for whatever reasons, Hydra would be worse.

They couldn't let Hydra destroy Tony's home or this town.

Steve was steps ahead of him and had just burst through the front door when explosions rocked the ground outside.

"Tony!" Steve roared.

"Get inside!" Tony yelled back. His voice had come from the tree lines, and they sprinted toward them.

Tony was up in a tree, a perfect nest of a spot that Bucky couldn't believe was a natural occurrence, but branches formed a natural ladder.

"You don't know who you're up against," Steve said.

"You do?" Tony's gaze was sharp as he stared down at them.

Steve hesitated, and Bucky waited for him to make the call.

"Yes."

"You think I should surrender?"

Tony's voice was suspiciously calm, and his right hand was hidden from view. Bucky realized the explosions were farther away - where Hydra *was*. Not where they were now.

Hydra hadn't been behind those, then. Not unless they'd decided to blow up the trees around themselves.

"No, you're right. They'll kill you on sight," Steve confirmed quietly.

"They'll have military grade weapons," Bucky said, surveying the landscape. The trees gave them cover, but also their enemies. Those cameras that Tony had placed on the perimeter - those would be useful. "Defenses, everything. They won't go down easy."

"This is our fight. Let us handle it," Steve said.

"They're after you," Tony said, and it was half question half statement. "Following you?"

"Maybe," Steve admitted.

"Thought we lost them, or we wouldn't have stayed," Bucky said quietly. "We're sorry."

Gunfire sounded, but far away. None of the bullets impacted the branches.

"I'll ask who you are later. For now, enemy of my enemy?"

Bucky and Steve nodded. "You got a plan?"

Tony's grin was sharp. "I've got more than just that."

Chapter 6

Fighting on home territory, even if it was only familiar to one of them, was a bonus that Bucky had forgotten about. Tony had traps and tripwires to waylay Hydra. He didn't have guns - just the metal glove that encased his right hand - but had other tricks that were taking care of Hydra one vehicle at a time.

Tony tried one last time to convince Bucky and Steve to wait it out in the safe house, saying they didn't have weapons, but they both shook their heads.

They *were* weapons, and as Hydra began to make it through the traps and the tricks in the woods, they would get their chance to prove it.

The first SUV appeared, clattering down the road as it listed to one side with flat tires.

Light from Tony's hand slammed into it, causing it to flip back and block the road for the vehicles after it.

Bucky whistled. "Damn."

"What the hell is that?" Steve asked, vibrating as he waited for his chance to charge forward.

"Science." Tony grinned.

Bucky laughed, awed and relieved. They'd never had such an upper hand on Hydra before. He and Steve had always needed to run for it as soon as they could, because even with their abilities they were two men against a military-level threat.

It was nice for the tables to turn.

Bullets ripped through the trees, thudding into trunks not far from where Bucky was hiding.

"They're in the trees," Steve said. He motioned for Bucky to weave left while he went right. "Flank 'em, take them out."

"Too late," Tony said softly. He was up in his perch, watching the video feeds that were disguised in the trunk. "They've circled behind the house. Stay close, just in case. The bunker will hold them until the cavalry comes."

"And who is the cavalry?" Steve asked.

Tony didn't have time to answer, as Hydra swarmed through the trees. There were too many of them, even as Steve sprinted at the line and hit them like a battering ram. Bucky followed, cleaning up the sides, while the light from Tony's glove left destruction in its wake.

The high-pitched whine was its only warning, and Bucky figured out when to duck and close his eyes against the burst of light. But that same noise would let Hydra track it back to its source, and Bucky slammed into a group that was attempting to follow that signal.

He pummeled through goon after goon, punching and kicking and breaking as he went. He was faster and stronger than any of these men, but no matter how many he and Steve took down, more came.

A tank drove through the SUV road block, and the machine gun on top aimed toward the house.

Steve barreled to it, leaping up and ripping the gun off the turret. Then he swung down and shouldered the tank on its side.

“Holy fuck.” Tony’s voice rang loud in the aftermath, and guns trained on Tony.

Bucky was numb to the sound of the shots as Tony flinched and hunched over, hand on his side.

“Dad!” Peter sprinted out of the house, eyes wild.

Bucky ran, seeing those guns turn to the kid. He wouldn’t be quick enough, he was too far - but Peter was fast, too fast.

Peter ate up the distance between him and Tony, leaped up into the tree branch and had Tony in a protective hold before any shots were fired. Then Peter was lifting Tony and jumping back to the ground, heading to the house.

A kid carrying a grown man like it was nothing.

Bucky knew what Tony was protecting, and from whom. The guilt stung, that he and Steve had led Hydra right to their door. He punched out his anger through the agents standing between himself and Steve.

Golden light rained from the sky, taking out a cluster of agents.

Bucky dove to the side to avoid another blast. A woman drifted down, the light surrounding her as she fired blasts from her fists.

Knives thudded into the agents standing next to Steve, a red-haired woman appearing from the road. More gunfire, and Rhodes stepped out from the trees and motioned Steve to the side.

“You okay, Peter?” the golden woman asked as she set herself on the ground, her hair still flowing in a magical wind.

“Dad isn’t,” Peter said, his voice small.

Tony groaned. “I’ll be fine, through and through. Don’t panic.”

“I’ve got the first aid kit,” Ned said, peeking out from around the door. “He’s going to be okay, right?”

“Bunker, kid! Get in the bunker!” Tony snapped.

“Everyone without a weapon get inside,” Rhodes commanded as he jogged to Peter and Tony, gun still up and aiming. “Carol?”

“We’ve got it handled,” the golden woman said as she lifted off into the air again, her gaze scanning the trees. “Natasha, take Clint and go sweep around back.”

The red haired woman nodded and disappeared.

“I guess the cavalry arrived,” Steve said quietly as he helped Bucky to his feet.

“Think so,” Bucky agreed.

“This whole town?” Steve asked, rubbing his forehead.

They were at the kitchen table - Steve, Bucky, Tony, and Rhodes. Carol, Natasha, and Clint were combing the woods to apprehend any stragglers that might still be out there, while Peter and Ned were holed up in Peter’s bedroom and probably letting the whole school know what had happened.

“Not everyone,” Rhodes answered. He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap. “But a fair number.”

“Such as Peter,” Bucky said softly, gaze on Tony.

Tony froze, muscles tensing, but then nodded. He seemed smaller now, with his shirt unbuttoned and displaying the gauze taped to his side. He would be fine, but it would take time to rest and recuperate. He looked tired.

“Such as Peter,” Tony echoed. “He’s why we moved out of the city, why Rhodey and I founded Alderon. A place where he and people like him could be safe.”

Steve clenched his fists and then hid them under the table. Guilt clawed its way up Bucky’s throat.

“We’re sorry, if we - if they followed us here,” Steve said. His shoulders hunched over. “We thought we’d lost them.”

“You might’ve.” Tony shrugged, then winced and touched his side. “They’ve been sniffing around for years. For all we know this was planned before you walked in.”

“But now they know you’re here,” Bucky said, heart heavy. For a short time, this had been his place of refuge, and he was sad to see it invaded. What was it like for this to be their home of so many years? “What will you do now?”

“We have defenses,” Rhodes said.

“That won’t be enough,” Steve argued.

“They’ll hold.” Tony was confident. “We’ve been preparing for just as long as they’ve been hunting.”

“We could lead them away, make them split their forces,” Bucky said, looking to Steve. “Depending on who saw what, they might just follow us.”

Steve nodded, but Tony was shaking his head.

“You want to do the speech?” he asked the mayor. “I’ll wreck it. In short, this is a safe place. We’ve offered it to anyone Carol can find, and I’m sorry she never found you. You don’t have to run, not if you don’t want to. Yes, I want to protect Peter, but we do that better together. Stay, if you want. There’s a place for you here, and you don’t have to hide.”

Rhodes shrugged, smiling. “Close enough, though maybe you should rehearse it a little for the next batch.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Everyone’s a critic.”

“We can’t put you in danger,” Steve said.

“We already are.” Peter edged out from around the corner, his face pale. “Because of me.”

“Pete -” Tony started.

“Because of what I am,” Peter said. “They won’t stop coming. Even if you leave, they’ll still come for me.”

Tony’s eyes shone, and his jaw clenched. It was Rhodes who answered, voice soft, “And Carol, and Natasha, and Pietro. It’s not just you, Peter. It’s all of us, for one reason or another.”

“But if I was normal, this wouldn’t be happening. We wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for me.”

“I think that almost every day,” Steve said. “But if I didn’t have this power, I couldn’t protect the people I love. Like you did today.”

Peter offered a small, trembling smile. “That’s what my uncle used to say, or something like that. ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’”

Steve nodded. “Sounds like a wise man.”

“So use your power here,” Tony said. “Protect the people of this town. Or, if you have to leave, tell anyone you find with powers about us so they can find shelter here.”

“We can’t make this whole town a target for Hydra,” Bucky argued against his hope.

He was glad to have Steve, that they shared this burden of power and responsibility. But it got lonely, on the road, and having a town, having a *home* - that was almost too much.

“We already are,” Tony said. “And trust me when I say we’re prepared to handle whatever Hydra can throw at us. You saw Carol, right? All glowy? You don’t want to cross her.”

Steve looked to Bucky. It was everything he wanted - they wanted. Everything they dreamed about when they talked late into the night.

It couldn’t be as easy as saying yes, could it? Hydra knew they would be here now. They’d be back, with more agents and more guns.

The town would need help, and Bucky and Steve had plenty of experience in fighting Hydra. They could be useful, here.

They could rest.

“We’ve done the running thing,” Bucky said slowly, hoping Steve was on the same page. “We know what that’s like. I’m good to try having a home and seeing if we can make that work.”

Steve considered that, then slowly nodded. “If everyone in town knows the risk, then I guess we can’t be bringing that much more trouble with us. We can help protect you.”

“We’ve got a ton of defenses -” Tony started.

“We’d appreciate the assist,” Rhodes interrupted. He smiled, welcoming. “Could use another pair of hands, especially to handle this guy.” He thumbed at Tony.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Good, stay, be useful or not, it’s fine. Guest house is all yours, if you can handle it.”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Steve said.

“Great,” Bucky added. “Thank you.”

Bucky found Steve’s hand under the table and squeezed it, smiling. Tony’s gaze was bright and warm as it found his.

“Then welcome home,” Tony said with a smile.

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